PART ONE

Chapter 3: Themes of Art

Major THEMES for this chapter include:

1. The Sacred Realm
2. Politics and the Social Order
3. Stories and Histories
4. Looking Outward: The Here and Now
5. Looking Inward: The Human Experience
6. Invention and Fantasy
7. The Natural World
8. Art and Art
Key Terms for this chapter include:

• space cells
• iconoclasm
Themes of Art

• Themes and purposes may differ within a work of art.

• A work of art may reflect more than one theme.
Our modern world of art includes schools, galleries, critics, collectors and museums. It features individual artists working independently expressing their own ideas.

In the past, an artist typically worked for a client, patron, or collaboratively in a workshop. Rarely were individual artists known.
The Sacred Realm

The sacred realm cannot be seen with human eyes. Religious images help to give concrete form to abstract ideas.

- **Iconoclasm**: Derived from the Greek word meaning “image breaking” and refers to the destruction of images in the name of spiritual purity.
Prayer Hall of Great Mosque, Spain, Begun 786 C.E. – served community

Upper Chapel, Sainte-Chapelle, Paris, 1243-48 - private for king & court
Madonna Enthroned. Cimabue. 1280-12

Early Christian art
Use overlap to create space. Prominence through size and placement. Baby Christ has adult-features but small. Tempera on wood
Politics and the Social Order

Political art and social statements are often intertwined and reflect the nature of a society.
The Great Pyramids, Giza, Egypt, 2500 BC
Liberty Leading the People, Delacroix, 1830

Guernica, Picasso, 1937
25’ x12’
Condemns violence – Spanish Civil War

Cubism,
Stories and Histories

Artists sometime use stories as subject matter to express cultural history or shared experiences.

• **Space cells:** An area within a work of art referred to as “painting within a painting” used for visual narration of a story.
3.10 Rama and Lakshmana Bound by Arrow-snakes, Sahibdin and workshop, 1650-52
Altar to the Chases High School, Christian Boltanski, 1987
Looking Outward: The Here and Now

This theme illustrates artwork dealing with the everyday, here and now, and often makes use of images that are part of the artists’ everyday lives.

The artists’ visual concerns are often close to their personal world.
The highway apparently ends here, disappearing into the woods - not a promising location for a gas station. The last car seems to have passed long ago; the attendant is shutting down the pump, and soon will turn off the lights and lock up for the night.

Hopper's painting represents a borderline situation. It is set at the frontier between day and night, between civilization and nature. The gas station has the appearance of a last outpost, where the human realm gives way, across the road, to the anonymous realm of nature. The edge of the woods rises like a dark wall in which no individual tree can be discerned. But our eye returns again and again to its warm hue. The bright, almost pure white fluorescent light in the gas station, in contrast, is almost painful to look at, and the eye shifts to the ribbon of road leading out of the picture to the right.
Gas, Edward Hopper, 1940
American Scene Painter
Windward, Robert Rauschenberg, 1963

Felt daily life could not be depicted with one image and treated canvas like scrapbook page. Controlled chaos and free association
Looking Inward: The Human Experience

This theme addresses what it is like to be human and questions that many humans ask like “Who am I?”. 
Talking Skull, Meta Warrick Fuller, 1937.
Self-Portrait with Monkeys, Frida Kahlo, 1943.
Woman Holding a Balance,
Johannes Vermeer, 1664
Invention and Fantasy

Art that springs from the imagination is represented through the theme of invention and fantasy. It is the product of dreams, fantasy, and daydreaming.
The Garden of Earthly Delights, Hieronymous Bosch, 1490

Triptych - 3 part painting, middle part shown. Other 2 sides can close and are painted on both sides.
Closed = creation.
Open (Left panel = Eden, middle = garden of earthly delights or false paradise of love, and right panel = Hell).
The Dream, Henri Rousseau, 1910
Empty Dream, Mariko Mori, 4’x10’, 1995
The Natural World

This theme deals with our relationship to nature and the artist’s use of it as subject matter. Some artists simply represent nature and others use it as a vehicle to explore other ideas.
The Oxbow, Thomas Cole, 1836.
White Clouds over Xiao and Xiang, Wang Jian, 1668

Landscape is most honored subject of Chinese. Not observed, but imaginary. Bird’s eye view unlike Cole’s landscape which makes us perched on hill looking down.
Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson, 1970
This theme explores the use of art being pursued for its own sake. Artists learn to make art by looking at art.
Erija in Suruga Province, Hokusai, 1831

Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai, Jeff Wall, 7.5’x12.5’, 1993)
Themes of Art: Summary

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